

# The Status-Regulating Function of Self-Esteem

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## 1. Why do we possess self-esteem?

An evolutionary approach to self-esteem

Self-esteem or how we feel about ourselves is one of the most popular topics in psychology. But what evolutionary function does it serve?

One theory, namely, **Sociometer Theory** (SMT) (Leary, 1999) proposes that because inclusion in social groups was crucial to our ancestors' survival, self-esteem evolved to track our level of inclusion in social groups, and raise this inclusion level when it got too low.

In support of SMT, studies show that being included raises self-esteem and being excluded lowers it (e.g. Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001).

## 2. Dominometer Theory

This research develops and tests a new theory of self-esteem called **Dominometer Theory** (DMT). DMT proposes that in addition to inclusion, **self-esteem tracks status**.



Most primate and human societies are characterized by **social hierarchies** and **competition**:

Apes engage in status competition



Human beings desire and pursue status



DMT proposes that humans came to develop self-esteem in order to track their position in the social hierarchy, and to motivate behaviour suitable to their social role.

## 3. Hypotheses

- Higher status predicts higher self-esteem.
- Higher self-esteem predicts more dominant behaviour.
- Manipulating status will affect self-esteem, i.e. raising/lowering status will raise/lower self-esteem, respectively.
- The link between status and self-esteem will be maintained after controlling for inclusion, thereby empirically distinguishing DMT from SMT.

## 4. Method & Results

### Study 1

Design: Correlation

Assessed the link between perceived status and self-esteem.

Participants: N=853 (424 men, 429 women; Age:  $M=30.47$ ,  $SD=10.68$

Measures: Self-esteem (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), Perceived Status & Perceived Inclusion (adapted from Huo, Binning, & Molina, 2010).

Analysis: Partial Correlations

Self-esteem	
Status	.32**
Inclusion	.31**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Results: Perceived status and self-esteem were positively correlated, even after controlling for perceived inclusion.**

### Study 2

Design: Correlation

Assessed the link between self-esteem and social behaviour.

Participants: N=620 (235 men, 385 women; Age:  $M=34.59$ ,  $SD=12.85$

Measures: Self-esteem (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), Social behaviour (SBI; Moskowitz, 1994).

Analysis: Partial Correlations

Self-esteem	
Dominant Behaviour	.49**
Agreeable Behaviour	.31**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Results: Self-esteem and self-reported dominant behaviour were positive correlated, even after controlling for self-reported agreeable behaviour.**

### Study 3

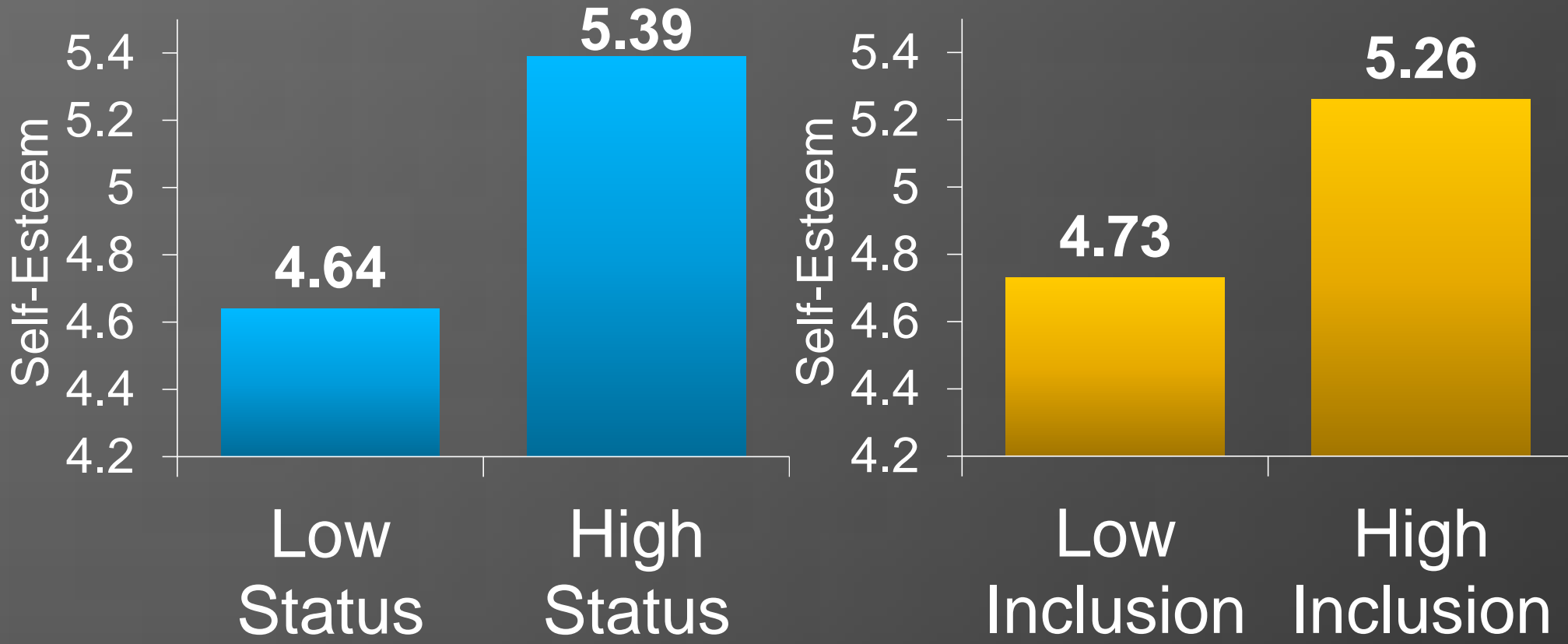
Design: Experiment

Manipulated anticipated status and anticipated inclusion and measured the effect on self-esteem.

Procedure: Participants completed a bogus test & were given false feedback indicating that they would achieve either high or low status in life, and would be either highly included or excluded in life. Their self-esteem was measured in response to this feedback.

Participants: N=110 (19 men, 91 women; Age:  $M=19.81$  years,  $SD=4.47$

Analysis: 2X2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Status and Inclusion as the independent variables & self-esteem as the dependent variable



**Results: Raising/lowering anticipated status raised/lowered self-esteem, respectively.**

## 5. Conclusions

- Status predicts self-esteem independent of inclusion.
- Self-esteem predicts dominant behaviour independent of agreeable behaviour.
- The link between status and self-esteem is not merely correlational but **causal**. Changes in status **cause** changes in self-esteem.

**Self-esteem acts as a status regulator!**

**Implications:** Our self-esteem tracks our status in social groups and influences our behaviour accordingly

## 6. References

- Huo, Y. J., Binning, K. R., & Molina, L. E. (2010). Testing an integrative model of respect: Implications for social engagement and well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36, 200-212.
- Leary, M.R. (1999). Making Sense of Self-Esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 8(1), 32-35.
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